Regional Multilateralism and Norm Localization

Although multilateralism in the form of regional cooperation, or simply regional multilateralism, has been successfully initiated and implemented in numerous regions of the world, similar developments cannot be observed in South Asia, which is still ‘the least integrated region in the world’ (World Bank, 2007). At present, there are four large regional organizations in South Asia and its neighbouring regions. In South Asia itself, regional multilateralism began in 1985 with the official launch of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In 1994, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral-Economic Cooperation (BIMST-EC) was founded. The Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) was formed in 1997, and in 2000, the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation (MGC) came into existence. India has been a founding member in all four of them.

At the time of writing, three of these four regional organizations are regarded as failures. In 2005, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh summarized the essence of 20 years of SAARC cooperation: ‘The honest answer is that regional economic cooperation in South Asia has fallen far short of our expectations and the dreams of our founding fathers. It remains far behind the more successful examples in both Asia and other regions of the world’ (Manmohan Singh, 2005). In 2007, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Myanmar Nyan Win concluded that ‘there has been a general perception that, despite seven years of efforts by MGC countries to move forward in areas designated for cooperation, there has been very slow progress’ (Win, 2007). And in 2009, the then Indian Minister of External Affairs Shashi Tharoor commented on the IOR-ARC that after 12 years of cooperation, ‘[IOR-ARC has not] done enough to get beyond the declaratory phase that marks most new initiatives’
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(Tharoor, 2009). Only BIMST-EC constitutes a regional organization which exhibits a modest level of success.

Two counter-examples of successful and thriving processes of regional multilateralism are the European Union (EU) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN): Since its inception in the 1950s, the EU has gradually evolved into a full-fledged economic and political union in which a number of member countries have now commenced to actually forgo parts of their state sovereignty by adopting a common currency and harmonizing parts of their respective foreign and security policy. In Asia, ASEAN—‘one of the most successful regional organizations in the developing world’ (Acharya, 2001, p. 208)—has gradually evolved into a visible and vocal organization in the region, effectively following its own ‘ASEAN way’ of institutional–organizational minimalism and an informal, non-legalistic method of cooperation. ASEAN has taken tentative steps to transform itself into a security community (Acharya, 2001), and since 1 January 2003, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is operational.

Several schools in the field of international relations attempt to explain processes of regional integration. However, the main body of literature has traditionally focused on developments in Europe and Southeast Asia. Since the first early deliberations on regional cooperation in South Asia took place, numerous studies have addressed the historic development, economic prospects, or security-related aspects, and the main body of literature on South Asian regionalism has, as the years progressed without tangible results, especially analysed reasons for the apparent failure of regional cooperation in the region. In general, the reasons cited for this failure can be summarized and grouped into seven different analytical categories.

(1) Political conflicts between the countries of South Asia. In South Asia, a common civilizational heritage, a common shared legacy of British colonial domination, and common identical problems of social and economic backwardness highlight an underlying streak of ‘unity’ of the region. At the same time, sharp divisions and manifold interstate conflicts exist which make cooperation very difficult. These political conflicts especially exist in the spheres of territory, terrorism, sharing of natural resources, and refugees: The Kashmir crisis between India and Pakistan has been the source of four major wars between the two countries. Sri Lanka and India differ over alleged Indian involvement with Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. The border situation between Nepal and India has remained problematic, and there are also unresolved political